

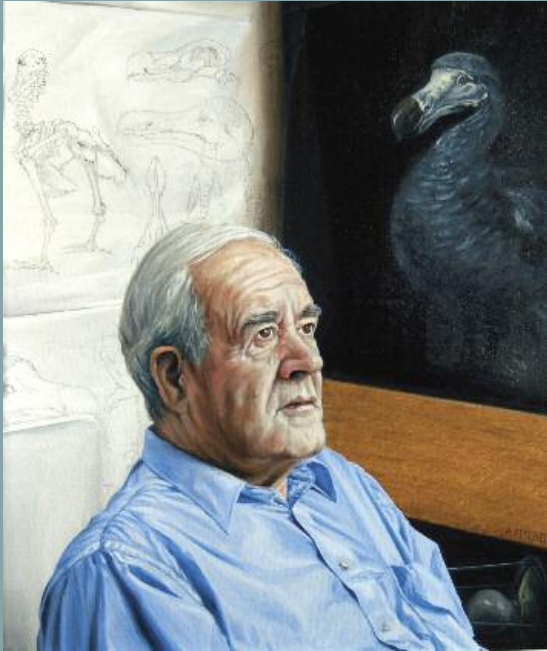
The Dodo is Dead: Long Live the Dodo



Art and Memorabilia
from the
Ralfe Whistler
Collection



MONNOW VALLEY ARTS



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All items illustrated are from the Ralfe Whistler collection

Front cover:

Top left: Chris Jones, *Speculation on the appearance of the Dodo* (detail), oil on board, 46 × 54 cm

Below left: Andrew Fitchett, *Dodo and Chick*, oil on board, 48.5 × 44.5 cm

Below centre: Richard Bawden, *Dandy Dodo*, linocut edition of 85, 32 × 33 cm

Inside front cover:

Andrew Fitchett, *Ralfe Whistler and the Dodo*, oil on canvas, 69 × 48 cm

Tessa Oates (Chipstead Pottery), *Dodo*, raku H 29 cm

Back cover:

Peter Foster, *Alas Poor Dodo*, bookplate for Ralfe Whistler, wood engraving, 7 × 5 cm
Badgeworks, *I'm Dead Interesting*, button badge 6 cm diameter

The Ralfe Whistler Collection

Ralfe Whistler has the world's largest collection of Dodo art and memorabilia. His fascination with the Dodo started when he inherited from his father a set of bones of the Dodo, the first to come to the UK in the 19th century.



1: Some of the Dodo Bones given to Hugh Whistler

Ralfe's father, Hugh Whistler, was born in 1889 and in about 1907 went to India to join the Indian Police so he could study the birds of the sub-continent having been encouraged to take up ornithology by Thomas Parkin, founder of the Hastings Museum and Hastings Natural History Society. It was through Parkin that he acquired a set of Dodo bones dug up in Mauritius in the 19th century.

Hugh Whistler formed a collection of 70,000 bird skins, wrote a handbook on Indian birds and discovered at least a dozen new species, all named Whistler.



2 and 3: Views of Ralfe Whistler's home The Dodo House, Battle, Sussex.

Ralfe was born in 1930 and all his childhood the Dodo bones were kept in their original box and shown to many ornithological friends that visited his parents at their home in Battle. His father died in 1953 and after a career in Canada, Africa and Australia he built himself a new home in the grounds of the family home which he called The Dodo House, and started to collect all things about the Dodo. This includes nearly 100 books, many sculptures, carvings, pictures and ephemera from around the world.

Even though the Dodo has been extinct for over 300 years, interest in the creature is undiminished with four new books published about the poor bird in 2013 alone in the USA, Mauritius, England and Holland.





4: Julian Hulme, *South East Coast of Mauritius 2003*, gouache, 40 x 50 cm

5: First day cover for a set of Mauritius stamps issued 25 June 2007

History of the Dodo or the Dronte

The Dodo, *Raphus cucullatus*, was a flightless bird found only on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. It became extinct within 90 years of man's arrival on Mauritius.

Although the existence of Mauritius was known to the Portuguese, it was not until 1598 that the first landing was made upon the island by a party of Dutch seamen. The island had been uninhabited

since its formation and, as a result, the natural species had developed in their own way and without fear of humans. In common with other places, where birds that had once flown had no predators, the dodo gradually became flightless and nested on the ground.

The Dodo was a member of the pigeon family and was discovered along with many other species on the island by the Dutch sailors. It fed on fruits, was about a metre high and weighed about 20 kilos. The first description of the Dodo was made in one of the ship's logbooks: "There is also a kind of bird, as big as a goose, with the body of an ostrich, the feet of an eagle, with a huge beak... a bird with little plumage,

wings the size of a teal, very fat, when plucked apparently very good, if tough skinned" (from the log book of the *Gelderland* written by Jacob van Heemskerck).

The protruding behind of the bird gave rise to the name 'dodaers', Dutch for 'fat arse', which became Dodo in later years.

During the early and middle years of the 17th century, the Dutch established a victualling post on Mauritius. Since 1606, pigs and goats had been introduced to the island and cats, dogs and rats had escaped from the ships. The introduction of farming on the island and the invasion by non-indigenous animals soon had a dramatic effect on its ecosystem. The food supply for the Dodos was compromised, the undergrowth trampled by pigs and eaten by goats and the eggs and chicks eaten by the rats and cats. By 1688 the last Dodos had been caught and the bird was extinct after only 90 years of human interference.



Mauritius became a French colony in the 18th century and was heavily planted with sugarcane and palms. Today Mauritius is an independent state with only the memory of the Dodo.

What did the Dodo look like ?

The image of the Dodo that has been passed down to us comes from descriptions by the early Dutch visitors. They are in part contradictory as to colour and form although they all agree that they had enormous heads, only a few feathers where wings should have been and large fatty rear ends with a tuft of curly plumes. Colours varied from grey and black to yellow.

The first illustrations of the Dodo were made from these written accounts and published about 1605. In about 1612, Roelant Savery drew the Dodo and by 1626 was incorporating the creature in his paintings of the animal kingdom. To this day, Savery's depiction of the Dodo is the recognised image of the



6: Chris Jones, *Speculation on the appearance of the Dodo*, oil on board, 46 × 54 cm

bird. By 1650 engravings of the bird were being included in anthologies of birds and were being widely distributed.

In more recent times, as more bones and remains of the Dodo have been discovered, attempts have

been made to reconstruct a complete skeleton of the bird to compare with the Savery images. The first bones were discovered in swampy areas in 1865. In more recent times near complete skeletons have been discovered that have enabled naturalists to create a

7: Jonathan Adams, *Copy of Roelandt Savery's painting from 1626 of the Dodo*, oil on canvas, 83 × 103 cm





8: Unidentified artist, 'Sod the Dodos', hand coloured cartoon, 10 × 15 cm



9: Unidentified artist, *Alice and the Dodo*, 16 × 16 cm



better view of what the Dodo looked like. Some of the early drawings show a lean bird probably weighing about 14 kg, whereas others show a very fat bird weighing much more. The explanation seems to be that the bird stored reserves to cope with periods of the year when food was scarce. It is also possible that there was more than one species of Dodo on the island and that male and female birds differed quite considerably in size and weight.

10: Unidentified artist, *Dodo Ornithology*, engraving 12 × 17 cm

The appeal of the Dodo

The Dodo has captured the imagination of naturalists since the 17th century but it was perhaps the depiction of the Dodo in *Alice in Wonderland*, written by Lewis Carroll, and published in 1865 with illustrations by Sir John Tenniel, that gave the Dodo its international appeal. Since then the exotic nature and fate of the Dodo or Dronte as it is known in some countries, has inspired artists the world over to depict this exotic bird. The Whistler collection contains depictions from over 40 countries. Artistic licence has made the Dodo blue, pink, green, brown, grey and just about any other colour you can imagine.

Just what colour was the Dodo ?



11



12



13



14

11: Unidentified artist, *Harlequin Dodo*, ceramic, H 46 cm

12: Unidentified artist, *Dodo*, Zimbabwean stone, H 33 cm

13: Sara Drake, *Dodo* 2001, papier maché, H 22 cm

14: Ron Williams, *Blue Dodo*, carved wood, H 51 cm

15: Patrizio Belcampo, *D is for Dodo*, screen print edition of 20, 52 × 52 cm

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ALAS
POOR
DODO

RALFE WHISTLER
~ HIS BOOK ~

